



The Idea of the University

Introduction

The aim of this main theme section is to discuss the idea of the university in the past, the present, as well as future perspectives.

Universitas, *pandidakterion/panepistemon*, *sveučilište* and *university* are names for institutions of learning where higher education is attained in all significant fields of knowledge. As an institution, it distinguishes between scientific and artistic qualifications, guaranteeing that he who receives them has attained an appropriate education and preparation for those challenging professions requiring a high level of scientific training or artistic maturity.

Institutions of higher learning have existed in numerous civilisations, and were often either priestly or temple schools, or aristocratic or state schools. In ancient India, in the 2nd and 1st millennia BC, students would gather around an eminent Brahmin and would learn from him the Vedas and those sciences connected with them. Such training could last as long as 16 years. Later, true institutions of higher learning would develop within some Buddhist monasteries, with hundreds of professors and thousands of students, an example of which being Nālanda university between the Gupta and Pāla periods, i.e. from the 5th to the 12th century.

In China, higher education was founded on the five Confucian classics. In the 2nd century BC, Emperor Wu Di of the Han dynasty founded such an institution of higher learning, known as *Dà xué*, the *Great Academy*, upon which the education system of imperial China was based for many subsequent centuries. It may be interesting to quote some principles from Confucius' work *Dà xué*, the *Great Learning*, about the ideals of education:

“The ancients who wished to illustrate illustrious virtue throughout the world, first ordered well their own States. Wishing to order well their States, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their persons. Wishing to cultivate their persons, they first rectified their hearts. Wishing to rectify their hearts, they first sought to be sincere in their thoughts. Wishing to be sincere in their thoughts, they first extended to the utmost of their knowledge. Such extension of knowledge lay in the investigation of things. Things being investigated, knowledge became complete. Their knowledge being complete, their thoughts were sincere. Their thoughts being sincere, their hearts were then rectified. Their hearts being rectified, their persons were cultivated. Their persons being cultivated, their families were regulated. Their families being regulated, their States were rightly governed. Their States being rightly governed, the entire world was at peace. From the Son of Heaven down to the mass of the people, all must consider the cultivation of the person the root of everything besides.”¹

In the West, Plato's Academy and Aristotle's Lyceum became the paragons of an educational institution in later times. The university began in the West as

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See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Learning.

a system of education that developed in late Antiquity, throughout the Middle Ages and in Modern-Age religious and secular universities.

The Pandidakterion in Constantinople, founded by Theodosius II in 425 AD, could be considered the first European university. University education in late Antiquity in Western Europe was founded on the *septem artes liberales*, and, throughout the Migration Period and the development of the feudal system, managed to preserve much knowledge that had been attained in classical Antiquity. It was greatly enriched through the acquaintance of scholars in the 13th century with the whole of Aristotle's scientific opus, which significantly spurred the development of the study of philosophy, theology and science. Aside from this, curricula of law and medicine were highly sought after out of practical necessity at mediæval universities, especially in the relatively more developed south of Europe.

The foundation of the University in Bologna in the late 11th century also brought with it the establishment of the principle of autonomy of the university from government interference. This autonomy enabled the best-informed, and not politics or the government, to decide upon the development of science and study, and allowed universities to choose their own professors and suitably educated leaders – some even had their own courts of justice.

After the Renaissance, in which elitist academies raised the overall quality of education, new standards began to be applied in the 16th, and especially the 17th and 18th centuries, over a significantly wider range of university students, in part spurred on by Protestant universities and in part by universities under the wing of the Catholic church – especially the Jesuit order – both in Europe and in missionary regions of the world. In the 18th century, Enlightenment notions made headway in schooling and at universities, giving education emphatic social tasks, and during the 19th century more and more universities became secular.

At this same time, reforms outlined by Wilhelm von Humboldt spread throughout German universities, based upon breadth of scientific theoretical and practical education (including experimental sciences) as well as the humanistic foundations of Antiquity, and aimed at assuring the quality education and the full development of the character of those able to assume the tasks and responsibilities of a scholar and scientist in a society where science was becoming an ever more effective catalyst of social, technical and economic development. The adoption of the Humboldtian university scheme assured for the best U.S. universities very high standards until today. It may be interesting to cite some principles of education from Humboldt's essay on the *Theory of Human Education*:

“‘Education, truth and virtue’ must be disseminated to such an extent that the ‘concept of mankind’ takes on a great and dignified form in each individual (GS, I, p. 284). However, this shall be achieved personally by each individual, who must ‘absorb the great mass of material offered to him by the world around him and by his inner existence, using all the possibilities of his receptiveness; he must then reshape that material with all the energies of his own activity and appropriate it to himself so as to create an interaction between his own personality and nature in a most general, active and harmonious form’ (GS, II, p. 117).”²

In the 20th and early 21st centuries, many reforms took place throughout school systems and universities, frequently at opposing purposes, especially in Europe: on one hand, the desire for higher, more elite scientific demands, and on the other for the expansion of the numbers of the educated in society, and on yet another for serving the needs of economic development and all else in the service of such development and the profit it brings. On one hand, the

latter has put university education to use in numerous ways and benefitted the development of the economy, just as Francis Bacon and even René Descartes imagined so long ago. On the other, however, this education has been less in the service of discovering and understanding the truth, and has begun to place science in the position of *ancilla æconomix*, which can in the long term distort and limit both the range of its discoveries and the ethical standards that scholars and scientists should respect at a Humboldtian university. Modern-day interference of the state and economy in the work and organisation of the university, processes of centralisation, standardisation and management are significantly altering the nature of the university and the role of the scientist in society. They place universities and scientists in the service of power and profit, and by endangering the autonomy of the university, they endanger the democratic principles of society and human rights, such as the right to free thought and the right to education.

In the world of free-market economics and the laws of profit, universities are also in danger from research institutes owned by large, especially international corporations. Here science ceases to be a public good, transforming instead into patents and business secrets. Universities are even offered the opportunity to survive financially by serving such corporations, since university scientists are a cheaper and often better-educated work force than those at expensive, private institutes.

Does this union with business aid the development of the university in the short- and long-term or endanger it? What kind of relationship between the sciences and universities on one side and economics and politics on the other would be the best for society and the most profitable for the economy in the long-term, and what kind would provide the highest impetus for discovering and understanding the truth?

Has the concept of the Bologna university reform of European universities in this light proven stimulative or limiting? What roles do the principles of university and scientific autonomy play here? Which states and cultural spheres develop faster and more desirably – those in which politics and capital control universities and the sciences and decide on them, or those in which politics, the economy and society seek advice and stimulus from the most eminent institutions and representatives of the academic community in order to better direct their political, economic and social decisions?

Do universities and the sciences today have a particular task and responsibility that is potentially vital to the future of the economy, knowledge and ethical values, the future of the social and political community, the future of the common good, vital to freedom and the maintenance of the world in which we live?

Do the values of scientific curiosity, truthfulness, accessibility of scientific information, general education, individual character building, cultivation of virtue, care for the common good, long-term strategies, moral responsibility for society, for peace, for nature, for world survival and improvement (or at least sustainable development) still play a role in the contemporary world and contemporary academic institutions?

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Humboldt, Wilhelm von. 1903–1936. *Gesamte Schriften*, Bd. I–XVII. Ausgabe der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin. See also: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wilhelm_von_Humboldt.

Does anybody reform our educational systems and universities along these lines? Is it not our responsibility and even duty as academics?

These are the questions upon which we invited the participants to reflect in their contributions to the international conference on the idea of the university, organised within the framework of the *Days of Frane Petrić* in Cres in 2012.

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We are especially grateful to Professor Richard Gombrich from Oxford University for his video participation at the conference and for the permission to republish on this occasion his lectures *British Higher Education Policy in the Last Twenty Years: The Murder of a Profession* and *Why Has British Education Gone so Wrong, and Why Can't We Stop the Rot? Popper's Nightmare*. We would equally like to express our thanks to Professor Konrad Paul Liessmann from Vienna University for his permission to republish his speech *Akademische Bildung. Ein Leitfaden für neue Eliten* in this issue. Their reflections have greatly inspired the participants who received them in the conference materials. They are also a great encouragement to all of us in the struggle for academic and scientific or scholarly values which are among the greatest achievements of the civilized world.

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